

Listening Without Responding: Sound, Ethics, And Moral Distance in the Zone of Interest

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ABSTRACT: Jonathan Glazer's *The Zone of Interest* has commonly been understood to be a film that ethically avoids the visual representation of violence in Auschwitz. This article, however, seeks to counter this prevailing assumption by arguing that the film not only avoids the visual representation of violence but also transforms its aural representation. Instead of using the visual to represent violence, the film relocates it to the realm of sound, where it appears in the form of constant infrastructural noise within the domestic sphere. The film, therefore, transforms the discourse of Holocaust films from the visual to the aural, from issues of visibility to issues of ethics of hearing. The study aims to explore how the film maintains its distance from violence ethically despite its aural presence. Theoretically, the study employs a qualitative approach to the close analysis of the film's sound organization. Theoretically, the study draws on the contributions of sound studies, trauma studies, and philosophical studies of hearing. The study particularly examines the use of techniques such as dynamic compression, masking, and repetition, and the blurring of distinctions between foreground and background sounds. The study particularly examines the film's use of these techniques in scenes where violence occurs off-screen but remains audible. The results suggest that the film complicates the prevailing assumption in both sound studies and Holocaust studies: that listening allows for ethical proximity or empathetic engagement. Instead, the film suggests that the longer an individual is habituated to normalized sonic violence, the more likely they are to feel moral distance rather than ethical engagement. The violence becomes ambient rather than disruptive, becoming part of the normalized soundscape of domesticity and thus reducing its potential for ethical engagement. Ultimately, the results argue that the film reconfigures the conversation around the representation of the Holocaust by problematizing the role of listening as an ethical practice. By rendering the violence of the Holocaust as an ambient soundscape, the film reveals that listening alone is insufficient for ethical engagement. In so doing, the film complicates the prevailing trend in Holocaust studies that idealizes listening as an ethical practice.

KEYWORDS: The Zone of Interest, Sound and Ethics, Moral Distance, Holocaust Representation.

INTRODUCTION

The Zone of Interest (Glazer, 2023) can be read as a film that eschews showing the exterminations at Auschwitz. The initial discussions of the film emphasize the ways in which it avoids showing exterminations, even to the point of criticizing the film's visual decision as a kind of absence. In broader discussions of Holocaust films, such an absence is characterized as a more ethical choice than showing exterminations. However, such discussions of the film overlook an important point: violence is not absent; it is relocated. The film does not simply fail to show exterminations; it redirects the screen. By relocating exterminations to sound, the film creates a new kind of sense of ethics, one in which listening, not looking, is the central concern.

The Zone of Interest begins by centering sound as a carrier of meaning. Before anything appears on screen, a dense sound that is rich in bass fills the space. This sound is industrial and abstract in nature and has no source. As light breaks through in the scene, it moves into the pastoral world: a family outing by a riverbank, children's voices, fabric moving through grass. However, gunshots occur in this scene at unpredictable times. A metallic sound is barely audible from outside the scene. The violence of Auschwitz is not absent; it is present in sound, as argued by Marie Thompson, the evaluation of sound's morality often relies on the concept of 'aesthetic moralism,' which defines some sounds as morally wrong (Thompson, 2014, p. 14). The fact that Glazer does not describe the sound of gunshots as piercing or excessive indicates that horror is not acoustically defined. The way in which this film works with sound is not about silence; it is about leveling. Michel Chion's definition of the 'added value' of sound is its ability to add meaning to the image (Chion, 1994, p. ix). However, in Glazer's work, this added value of sound, which could have heightened the horror of the scene, spreads or diffuses horror. The diminished gunshots do not disrupt or disturb the idyllic scene and are integrated into it, which modifies its effect. Chion's definition of the 'acousmatic voice,' as discussed in 'The Voice in Cinema,' refers to sounds from which the source cannot be determined. The violence in Auschwitz is acousmatic, as it is heard but not seen (Chion, 1999). The gunshots do not arrive in the film in a sharp, snapping sound that slices through all other sound. The high end of gunshots

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is muted and blurry due to distance. They exist in a middle ground that is neither too loud nor too quiet. A low industrial sound exists underneath all the sounds of domestic conversation. This sound is continuous and blends in with all other sounds. There is no contrast in this scene; rather, violence is integrated into sound. Scholarly discourse often locates sound in terms of ethics: listening as a way to traverse distance, a way to bring back presence, a way to listen more intensely. Glazer's film offers a different understanding: that listening can be one with indifference. This film establishes a relationship between sound and life that is intimate and inescapable. There is no ethical break in this film. By integrating violence into sound in this way, violence is normalized in terms of hearing. The question is no longer how one hears horror; it is how one absorbs it.

In fact, Emilija Talijan argues that this film transposes witnessing from visual to auditory perception, requiring viewers to become "earwitnesses" rather than traditional eyewitnesses (Talijan, 2025, p. 552). However, this form of witnessing through auditory perception is fraught with challenges since the film does not guarantee that hearing will lead to ethical witnessing but reveals the challenges of ear witnessing.

As Carolyn Birdsall has shown in her study of Nazi soundscapes, the earwitness figure was located within systems of discipline and surveillance rather than in opposition to them (Birdsall, 2012, pp. 11-12). In this context, listening does not necessarily transcend spatial or temporal distance; rather, it can reinforce such distance. For Jean-Luc Nancy (Nancy, 2007, pp. 157-158), listening is a resonant exposure to the other, "a becoming-sound of sense," which overcomes the oppositions between subject and object. Listening, in this sense, carries an ethical meaning. In dialogic theories like Buber's I-Thou relation, listening is an ethical response to a call (Jons, 2024, p. 1). Glazer's movie, on the other hand, designs a kind of listening without response, or a hearing that doesn't lead to relation.

This reading proceeds through an attentive listening to the film's sonic organization, rather than any technical analysis of the sound levels or wave forms. The analysis will examine scenes where off-screen violence is represented auditorily but visually absent, scenes where domestic and industrial sounds blend together without conflict, and scenes where there is continuity of sound despite changes in space or time. Of particular interest is the use of dynamic range, masking, repetition, and the breakdown of sonic hierarchies. All of these will be examined as significant to the viewer's perception and response, and so the central concern is not just with the relationship between sound and image, but with how the prolonged presentation of leveled violence changes the circumstances under which the search for meaning in sound can be considered ethical.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The relevant theoretical frameworks for this film group revolve around three interconnected ideas: the relationship between sound and power, the ethical value of listening, and the temporality of trauma. In all three areas, sound is often described in terms of transformative capacity. In Glazer, we see all three ideas addressed but reworked.

Jacques Attali's argument that "any organization of sounds...is...a tool for the creation or consolidation of a community" locates sound in terms of territorial and power relationships (Attali, 1985, p. 6). Sound is therefore a cartography of power prior to visual expression. Murray Schafer's argument that keynotes and signals represent different orders of sound-based power locates sound in terms of normative understanding via background sound (Schafer, 1977, p. 9). In terms of wartime experience, J. Martin Daughtry suggests that sound moves "around corners, through windows and walls," therefore preceding sight and imposing a particular order (Daughtry, 2014, p. 26). As Phil Alexander writes in his study of the memorial soundscapes in Berlin, "silence is not the absence of sound, but refracts its environment." (Alexander, 2018, pp. 778-779). Likewise, in *The Zone of Interest*, violence is not silenced, but rather refracted through the use of ambience, which eliminates space without producing direct conflict. All these arguments highlight sound's capacity for territorialization.

At the same time, listening has often been argued to be ethically productive. Judith Butler has argued that media frameworks shape what lives are grievable (Butler, 2009, pp. 1-3). In Glazer's film, the way that violence is integrated into domestic soundscapes is part of this process of framing: the dead are present in sound but not present in terms of grievability. Lipari's use of Levinasian philosophy suggests that listening allows for an ethical response in terms of receiving the address of the other (Lipari, 2012, pp. 229-231). Lovatt suggests that sound design allows for "bridging the distance between self and other," therefore aligning spectators in terms of ethics (Lovatt, 2015, pp. 26-27). Birdsall's work on earwitnessing emphasizes the ethical power of sound testimony. In all three areas of sound studies, proximity facilitated by sound is often described in terms of ethical capacity.

Trauma theory heightens this expectation. Cathy Caruth's work on trauma emphasizes that it is characterized by latency and rupture and that it is defined by repetition that breaks with temporal continuity (Caruth 1996: 4-8). Dorian Lange's work emphasizes the silence of wartime trauma and the role of non-verbal communication in conveying trauma's persistence. In all of these theories, trauma is characterized by disruption and destabilization.

What all of these theories have in common is that they imply an optimism about the disruptive or redemptive power of sound. *The Zone of Interest* does not argue against these theories; rather, it questions them. *The Zone of Interest* shows that sound can territorialize violence in a way that does not destabilize domestic order; that hearing can be morally inert; and that repetition can convert rupture into atmosphere. *The Zone of Interest* corrects the tendency in trauma theory and sound studies to over-idealize hearing by showing that hearing alone is not enough.

THE SONIC CONSTRUCTION OF MORAL DISTANCE

The manner in which the movie begins is territorial in nature. The garden wall provides visibility without eliminating audibility. In the early scenes of domestic activity, the soundscape presents a clear hierarchy of sounds in the foreground, such as the sounds of stems snapping off, insects producing high-pitched buzzing sounds, and fabric rubbing against the skin. The dialogue is clear and minimally reverberant. At the next level are the sounds of everyday activity, such as the constant low industrial drone that fills the lower end of the frequency range and is minimally modulated. Gunfire interrupts these sounds in irregular clusters of three to four shots, followed by a pause and then another cluster. The level is compressed so that it is no higher than dialogue. It is in the same dynamic range as other sounds.

In the opening garden scenes (around 00:02:30–00:05:00), the peaceful domestic setting is occasionally disrupted by the sound of gunshots, which occur at regular intervals without overwhelming the audio spectrum. From the outset, this repetition indicates that violence will not be expressed as an auditory shock, but will be contained and regular in the soundscape. Although the gunshots occur in random bunches, their volume remains within the same range as the rest of the sounds and dialogue.

In order to understand the sonic processes at work, it is important to first understand the following terms: dynamic range is the range between the quietest and loudest sounds in a mix. When dynamic compression is used, the dynamic range is lessened, thus reducing the distinction between foreground and background sounds. In *The Zone of Interest*, gunfire, screaming, and other noises are not louder than domestic dialogue but are instead leveled on an equal plane with them. Masking is the effect whereby one sound masks another. Masking is not the same as covering up a sound; instead, it is the way in which one sound becomes less prominent than another. In various scenes in the film, children's laughter, garden sounds, or dialogue masks cries in the distance. Hierarchical leveling is the way in which the sounds in the film blur the distinction between foreground sounds and background sounds. In *The Zone of Interest*, atrocity is not announced; instead, it is the background noise.

In terms of Schafer's theory, gunfire is supposed to act as a signal that could require attention. In this case, it is normalized as a signal, which retains meaning and loses attention-grabbing qualities. Violence is not absent; it is merely leveled in terms of sound. This is precisely the manner in which political integration is accomplished. The machinery of the camp, the gunfire, and the screams are the tone of the domestic environment. A similar structure describes the breakfast scene (around 00:14:00), where informal dialogue continues without interruption with subdued industrial noises and metallic reverberations in the background. The industrial drone does not interrupt dialogue but supports it. The coexistence of domestic intimacy and infrastructural violence demonstrates how extermination becomes embedded in the domestic acoustic space rather than being an external factor. The Höss family is not disturbed by extermination sounds; instead, extermination is part of the climate. Attali's argument that sound creates community is seen in the manner in which domestic life is stabilized in an acoustic regime of violence (Attali, 1985, p. 6).

A significant point is reached when Hedwig praises the beauty of her garden. In the process, a faint scream is picked up in the background of her speech. It is faint and distant, falling in the higher frequency range and partially overlapped by the speech itself. In children playing near the wall (around 00:23:00), the children's laughter is located in the higher frequencies of the audio spectrum, while the distant cries are only just audible. The children's laughter does not drown out the distant cries of suffering; instead, it overlays them sonically. What is not achieved is absence, but attenuation.

Violence passes through the wall, but its prominence is lessened. Sonic proximity is established but ethical awareness is deferred. The combination of sounds neither highlights nor focuses on the scream but merely competes with other domestic sounds and remains subservient to it. Lovatt's idea of sonic proximity transcending distance is based on the assumption that proximity to the other is essential for ethical acknowledgment (Lovatt, 2015, pp. 26-27). Glazer's work ensures that acoustic proximity is established as an undeniable phenomenon, as the scream crosses the wall, but acknowledgment is not forthcoming. The movie portrays a structural dichotomy between the audible and the ethical.

Repetition is another significant structural component of the movie. Gunshots are repeated during meals, dialogue, and even leisure activities. Their pattern is irregular yet predictable and therefore puts off both shock and silence in advance. They do not lead up to some dramatic point in the narrative but instead repeat in such a manner that they blur the lines between event and interval in time. Listening becomes an act that is measured in terms of exposure, where violence that is initially audible gradually becomes commonplace.

The scene featuring the river is another instance of such integration of sounds in the movie. Children are swimming while the flow of water crosses the mid-frequency range in smooth continuity. Simultaneously, the industrial hum deepens in tone and combines with the river sounds in terms of frequency range. The combination of sounds creates a blurring of lines between organic and artificial sounds. Laughter is another sound that occupies the higher end of the frequency range and slices through the cacophony without dominating the hum itself. It is not an issue of contrast between sounds but their coexistence, where extermination and leisure share the same frequency range.

Trauma theory frequently emphasizes the value of rupture, but in this particular study, rupture is deliberately avoided. Caruth's model of belated shock is premised on the idea of fracture, which is described in Caruth (Caruth, 1996, pp. 4-8). Glazer, however, proposes the idea of persistence instead of fracture. The nocturnal progression wherein the smoke becomes faintly discernible (around 00:37:00) heightens the degree of visual ambiguity and would have been conventionally taken to indicate a forthcoming

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rupture. Yet, the sonic field does not become explosive. There is no significant crescendo to accompany the darkness. Instead, the same low-frequency hum and controlled gunfire are sustained, demonstrating that even enhanced visual tension does not translate into sonic disruption. Rupture is deliberately withheld within the sonic field. Violence does not create a disruption in the home; it is instead the foundation and the support for the home. Trauma, therefore, is not explosive but atmospheric. It is not until the final transition to the contemporary museum space (approximately 01:36:00) where subtraction is felt as a rupture. The sounds of cleaning, the mops being pulled, the sound of the vacuum, all take on heightened significance within the empty space. The absence of gunfire is now legible. The silence, after the saturation, is significant.

The position of the spectator is another factor in this relationship. The spectator hears what the Höss family hears, but the information is not filtered or obscured. The difference, however, is not one of reception but interpretation. The film, therefore, shifts the emphasis to the position of the spectator, not whether or not the spectator hears, but what it does to the processes of attention. The spectator is forced to endure the constant, evenly paced violence, and it is in this process where it is revealed that listening is structurally contingent. Being close to the violence does not automatically translate to responsibility but could also be the cause for normalization.

CONCLUSION

The Zone of Interest reconfigures the representational politics of the Holocaust by transposing the site of ethical engagement from visibility to duration. Instead of representing violence in terms of spectacle or silence, the film incorporates violence into acoustic infrastructure. Through processes of dynamic compression, masking, and rhythmic repetition, it transcodes signals into environments. In doing so, the film also undermines the dominant critical approach to the politics of listening, which assumes that listening is inherently redemptive or disruptive. Instead, the film argues that audibility is not sufficient to ensure ethical engagement. The film's territorialization of violence, its reliance on habituation through repetition, and its substitution of rupture with persistence demonstrate that listening can be absorbed into the ordinary. The film does not deny the possibility of ethical engagement in listening; instead, it reveals its weakness. However, if violence is imbued with climatic significance, ethical engagement demands more than exposure. It demands interruption.

The film forces the spectator to occupy a space of auditory coexistence with exterminatory violence. In doing so, it raises the stakes of the politics of listening itself. The film reveals that the fundamental question is not the absence of sound, but the ease with which sound becomes ordinary. Within this revelation is the film's darkest truth: that ethical engagement is not secured by silence, but by the normalization of what is continually heard.

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